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SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN CROWLEY MEETS AWAMI LEAGUE LEADERS

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Congressman Joseph Crowley met with Awami League (AL) leader Sheikh Hasina, with several AL members and embassy officials. Hasina and others said the international community and election monitors need to better understand the election situation in Bangladesh, perhaps by arriving well in advance of elections. Hasina accused the BNP/JI of supporting international and JMB led domestic terrorism, and complained of an already politicized election process. Congressman Crowley discussed the legislative status of draft US legislation on duty free access for all goods from Bangladesh and pressed for action on corruption issues. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On February 22, Congressman Joe Crowley met with Awami League and opposition leader Sheikh Hasina. Also present were the AL's General Secretary Abdul Jalil, Faruk Ahmed Chowdhury, Dr. Mahmud Hassa, and Dr. Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir. Robin Roizman, professional staff member on the Committee on International Relations, Charge d'Affaires, control officer, and poloff (notetaker) were also present for the one hour meeting.

¶3. (SBU) Crowley congratulated Hasina on returning to Parliament. Hasina replied saying that the AL has always wanted to return, but it was only thanks to attendance by the CDA and other foreign diplomats at her return session that she was able to speak freely in Parliament. She promised to remain so as not to give the government an excuse for not discussing the AL's election reform proposals. Hasina continued saying that the international community does not really understand the situation here in Bangladesh, and asked Crowley, rhetorically, "how many of your Party members have been killed" for supporting their party. She recounted the August 21, 2004 grenade attacks, accusing the BNP/Jamaat Islami government for sponsoring the attack, saying that "JI is primarily behind it." Hasina and others accused BNP/JI of using black (illegally earned) money to support its terror and voter intimidation programs, citing several examples of violence against ordinary AL voters following the last election. She accused the Prime Minister's son, Tarique Rahman, of recently meeting with both Italian Mafiosi and Dubai underworld leader Daud Ibrahim to improve his torture and intimidation techniques.

¶4. (SBU) Hasina and others lambasted the voter registration process. They repeated their position that the voter list should be updated, rather than created anew. They complained about the politicization of the process, from the Election Commission down through the use of party activists as

enumerators to conduct the voter registration drive, She complained of selective registration, saying the registration process is flawed because "its easy to discriminate as everyone knows who supports what party." As evidence of the politicization of the Election Commission, she cited its refusal to accept a High Court decision that the EC should only update old lists rather than make new lists. (Comment: The actual court decision had language supporting both the AL's and the BNP's positions. End comment) Hassina asked for the international community to take note of all this and to provide a strong presence in Bangladesh well in advance of the elections and "not simply the day of the election." The AL leaders complained that the recent surge in prices of basic commodities was simply a BNP/JI effort to earn additional funds for their pre-election coffers. On JMB, Hasina and others alleged that the bombers had to have BNP/JI cooperation in order to detonate the 500 bombs across the country. Arguing the BDG continues to protect JMB, she said no arrested JMB member has been the victim of an extrajudicial killing, while "minor criminals are killed" as a rule.

¶5. (SBU) Crowley accepted the statements asking for additional international community involvement in the elections, informed Hassina of the difficulty in passing legislation on duty free access for Bangladesh garments, and pressed for movement on corruption. On the voter registration issue, Crowley probed for information on how the draft lists might be reviewed and what role the AL would play in correcting the lists before they became final. Hassina acknowledged that the AL would have an opportunity to review the lists and propose corrections, additions and revisions, but seemed to dismiss this opportunity as beyond the manpower

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capacity of the alliance. Despite the difficulties, Crowley urged Hassina to take advantage of all legal means for ensuring registration of her party's supporters, saying the goal should be the registration of all legally eligible voters.

¶6. (U) This cable was cleared by Representative Crowley.
CHAMMAS